

A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church
By Chris Fillingham
“A Small-Self/True-Self Story”
Luke 16:19-31
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The bible is vast and complex and rich in ***so many*** ways. For starters, you have over 40 completely different authors, or groups of authors. And these authors span way more than 1,000 years.

And they have collected stories that were told and shared around dinner tables and campfires, from generation to generation. These stories were passed down before some of these authors finally compiled and wrote them down.

Not only that, but the Bible has all different kinds of literature in there. There are beautiful stories that remind us of the story we are all part of, the story of creation, of humanity, the story of trying to know God, the stories of making a mess of our lives and our communities and in that mess, trying to find redemption. The stories of the bible are about us.

And then there are other parts of the bible that aren't stories at all. They are technical writings like you'd find in a textbook. There are law codes, building plans, and the logistics of planning worship.

And on top of that, you have portions that are poetry and songs... and not just in the Book of Psalms, but there are also poems and songs sprinkled throughout other Old and New Testament books.

You have portions of the bible that are wisdom sayings
And portions that are erotic love poetry

And there are letters that were written to individuals,
and letters that were written to communities
letters that were saved and shared.

And there is subversive, coded literature,
the apocalyptic-protest literature of Daniel and Revelation
subverting the political powers of their day.

So the bible is really a profound, beautiful gathering of all these different writings into one very complex book that has become our scripture. This collection of writings has become sacred to us... because somehow in their coming together and in their being read today, God speaks to us.

Together they are the writings that shape the life of the church.

And so, we call them “inspired.” They are “God-breathed.” God breathes life into us and into the church in a unique way through the bible.

And that breathing, that breath of life, comes to us as we learn to read these different kinds of texts differently, on their own ground, each in their own way.

So you can't read it all with the same set of tools. You can't read Psalms like you read Genesis. You can't read Jonah like you read Jeremiah. You can't read Paul's letters like Romans or Galatians, like you read the Gospels.

I mean, imagine if you tried.

That would be like me reading Brandt & Theo's *Thomas the Tank Engine* book, the same way I read a Harry Potter book to Noelle, the same way I read the newspaper in the morning, the same way I read one of my theology books for school.

You can't read them all the same because they aren't meant to be read the same way. Different parts of the bible invite us into different kinds of reading and different kinds of hearing and even different shades of spirituality.

And God speaks to us and breathes more and more life into us through the bible as we learn to read each portion of writing on its own terms, while still in relationship with all the other writings.

So like I said, the Bible is beautiful, complex and rich in so many ways. And not just in its vast diversity. When we talk about the scripture being inspired, the church has always believed that God breathes into us through the bible as we learn to read any one passage in deeper and deeper ways. There are these layers of meaning in any one given passage.

In fact, throughout most of the history of the church, there was thought to be 4 distinct levels of reading the scripture. The first level is, of course, **the literal level**. What does it literally say and mean, and what did it literally mean in its original context?

It's an important first question when coming to any portion of scripture. But it's only the first question. In fact, the literal meaning of the text is considered the smallest of its meanings.

The second layer of meaning is **the allegorical level**. So how does this become an allegory to something more in our faith, our faith story? So take the story of Exodus, for example. The Exodus event in the Old Testament and the Passover in Exodus become an allegory for Jesus' death and crucifixion and resurrection. On the allegorical level, Exodus becomes representative of something more than just the literal/historical meaning.

Then if we keep digging down, the next layer of meaning is the **ethical reading** of the text. So in the story of Exodus, when the Hebrew slaves are set free from the power of the Egyptian Empire and power of the Pharaoh, there is the literal meaning, the allegorical meaning, and then the ethical layer of meaning that speaks about oppressed people and enslaved people in any society.

So that ethical reading might just say something about the people in our own society that are used and trapped to support the way of life of the powerful.

Or it might say something about people in the other parts of the world that work in sweatshops, making our clothing cheap so we can maintain our way of life.

In the ethical reading of the Exodus story, God breathes conviction into the life of the Church. God breathes concern for the marginalized, for the oppressed. God breathes a passion for justice and mercy into the life of the church.

But that's not the deepest layer of meaning. The deepest layer of meaning has a funny name. It's a word you're probably not used to. It's called the "**anagogical reading.**"

The anagogical reading holds all those other layers of meaning together. It doesn't leave any of them behind. It doesn't exclude them. It holds them together, while also transcending them. This is when God starts to breathe through the story, something profound and eternal. Something that connects the depths of the soul to the depths of the divine.

So again in our example of the Exodus story, this is the place where something mystical is being communicated... about the ways that we ourselves are enslaved.

It's about the way that there is something in our soul that knows it has been made for the promised land of God, but it is trapped and it is reduced to making bricks for the pharaoh.

But God longs to set us free, free from all that enslaves us.

And when you begin to see and hear that in the Exodus story, your soul is coming alive to the scriptures in some of the deepest ways.

So there are these 4 classical layers of meaning when reading the scripture and that's part of how God breathes, through the bible, into our lives, and into the church.

Of course, these levels of meaning tend to weave in and out of one another... the 4 levels of meaning don't always flow in a straight line. And knowing these 4 levels, and being able to distinguish them isn't what is really important. ***What matters is that we keep in mind there are always deeper and deeper meanings to the bible... meanings that can take us to some profound places.***

And the literal level of meaning, while important, is the smallest of the meanings.

Our gospel reading this morning, this story of Lazarus and the rich man, is a good example of that. On a very literal level, you have Jesus telling another parable... a story for teaching the crowds something that day.

And it's a unique parable because someone in this parable is actually given a particular name. That rarely happens in any of Jesus' stories.

Typically, Jesus gives his characters a generic description. So you have "a land owner" or "a father" or "a shepherd". But Jesus does something very different here because he makes this parable personal.

There is some generic rich man,
and then there is a poor man with a name, Lazarus.
And on one level maybe Jesus is giving him a name...
so that we'll remember that the poor among us are people too...
as real and human as we are.

But that's not all that is in this story, is it? There is also something here about where we are making our home.

Both Lazarus and the rich man die. Lazarus wakes up in the bosom of Abraham, but the rich man finds himself suffering in Hades in Jesus' story.

And here is where it's important to understand the literal context, because sometimes people have tried to turn this story into a teaching about hell and what it's like. But that isn't what Jesus is doing.

This is a parable, a wisdom story, remember? Which means, if we take it too literally, we're missing the point. As a wisdom story, what Jesus is really doing is teaching us about what it's like to wake up to the reality we are living in. That's what parables and wisdom stories are supposed to do. That's how they work.

And so, there's a good chance that the distance and the longing and suffering that the rich man is experiencing in Hades isn't here to teach us about what hell is like, but to teach us about what it's like to live your life distant from God and to be unaware of it.

And maybe that torment that the rich man is experiencing is what it is like to wake up one day (whether in this life or the next) and realize just how far you are living from the divine presence.

I imagine that if we could see that distance here and now, we'd see just how profoundly tragic that is... and just how much we are tormenting ourselves, creating our own hell, our own suffering, whenever we are living for ourselves, blind to those around us, rather than for God.

That's part of the meaning of this story.

But then there is also the ethical reading of this story, and that's important here. The Gospel of Luke keeps pushing us to deal with the ethics of the poor and the rich. Luke makes us wrestle with the reality of the outsider, the marginalized, more than any other gospel writer.

And so maybe the ethical meaning of the text is telling us about the hell we're creating, and the distance from God we are living every time we ignore the poor among us and around us.

Certainly there is something here in the ethics of generosity, and sharing our wealth, and realizing the personhood, the name, of the many, many disenfranchised of our society, the people who sit at our gates that we simply don't notice as we go about our business.

That's another layer of meaning in this story. And to read this story well, we need to hold all these meanings together.

But I've found myself wondering about a different layer of meaning. Call it the Holy Spirit working on me, call it a stretch, call it the anagogical reading of the text... but I wonder if this story is also about what is going on inside each of us...

I mean, what if we are not the rich man or Lazarus in this story, but instead, what if we are both. Both of them are within us. Both of them are different parts or different selves... operating inside of us.

On the one hand you have this part of you, the rich man, who is "dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasts every day," as Jesus describes him. That's the part of you that can't help but care about how you look to those around you,

the self that wants to be comfortable and secure,

that is saving and working to get ahead,

the self that wants to manage your life well,

that wants to determine your future.
And that's not all bad, right?

Or maybe it's the self that needs its appetite to always be fulfilled,
its appetite for food, or pleasure,
for entertainment or for fun
or maybe its appetite for meaning and for importance...that are always driving you.

Whatever it is, those appetites are always in control, and so this self feasts on those appetites every day.

In the spiritual tradition, that's sometimes called the small self or the false self.

All of us have a small self, and it's not **all** bad. In fact, part of growing up is helping our children to develop their small self-identities. It's part of developing belonging and meaning.

So we teach our kids:

"We're Cardinals' fans and this is our team."

"We're Fillinghams and this is how Fillinghams act."

"We are Baptists and this is what Baptists do."

These are all part of our small self construct that we need to build along the way. But that small self is not our essence... it's not what spiritual tradition calls our true self... who we are at our deepest core, our real identity.

Another way to understand this, for those of you that have been doing enneagram work, is that your personality number is another part of your small self. It's how you operate in the world and how you've tended to create meaning. But your personality, your enneagram number, is not who you are. It's not your essence.

And what the enneagram is trying to do is to help you recognize that we over identify with our personality. We think we are our emotions and our preferences, and how we think, and how we think we react to people in our lives.

We think that's who we are, but it's all personality stuff.

All that stuff that makes up our personality is not bad, but when we have attached ourselves to it, when we think it's who we are... it controls us, and we're not free to recognize and live from our deepest self, from our true self, which is the image of God within you.

Most of the time we don't see it though. Our small-self identity is the only identity we form.

We're defined by the externals. (the things we do for a living, the way we live in this world, who our friends are, what high school we went to, our enneagram number, our Myers-Brigg's letters). We over identify with the generic rich man in us, and all the externals.

When that happens, we give everything over to this small-self.

We clothe it with meaning.

We feed it daily by what we say yes to, and what we say no to.

It is the only self we recognize as we go about our life.

But your true self, your essence, is not the generic rich man. **Your True Self has a name.** It is Lazarus.

It has a name because it's who you really are. And this true self is often sick, and starving to death... because you never see it. You don't recognize it.

All your life is being given to that small self,
the rich man, you keep clothing.

But Lazarus... is your essence, it is you. It has your name. And it's waiting for you to see it, and know it.

Your deepest identity, your meaning, your true self, comes only from the heartbeat of God.
Its home... is in God.
It lives... by the Love of God.
It is the divine spark, the divine image within you.

And that place, the domain of your true self, is the place of freedom and joy and peace. When you live from that place, when you are no longer controlled by all these externals, you live the experience of the Apostle Paul when he wrote, **"It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me."** That's the place of your true self.

And so, part of what this story is helping us to see is that your true self always abides in the bosom of Abraham, in the home of God.

But this nameless rich man within you, that small self... with all its false identities... of course it only exists in Hades, in the land of shadows... because none of that was real to begin with.

And that suffering there of the rich man... is also our suffering,
if this is the only place we have placed all our meaning,
if we spend our entire lives only feeding, and living out of the shadow of the small self.
while never noticing our true self,
letting the true self languish away,
starving for life,
longing to be fed and to be nourished.

And so as God is breathing life into us through this story this morning, perhaps we are invited to see Lazarus at our gate, withering away.

And we're being invited to open the gate, and get to know the beautiful soul we've been given,
and to feed, and know, and live with our deepest identity in God.

That doesn't mean you have to hate the rich man, that small self in you. No, it needs grace too. It's part of you. But it's time to no longer let it define your life. Simply see it for what it is... just a shadow of your essence.

This morning as we prepare to come to the table, I want to invite you to bring both selves to the table,
bring that nameless rich man, that is petty and wants to be seen and is so in need of grace.
But also bring Lazarus, your deepest essence.

Here at the table, bring them to be fed and known by God, in the bosom of Abraham.
So that you can learn to be free and living from your deepest and truest essence in
God.
Amen.

Silent Reflection

"It is a spiritual disaster for [a person] to rest content with [their] exterior identity Since we are made in the image and likeness of God, there is no other way for us to find out who we are than by finding in ourselves the divine image."

~Thomas Merton, *The New Man*

"The recognition of our true self, in the divine image, is then a recognition of the fact that we are known and loved by God." ~M. Basil Pennington

*"Certainly, once I know that I am ever embraced by the Divine Creative Love,
loved by Love itself,
by the Love that is the source of all that is,
then I certainly will never again see myself created by what others think."*

~M. Basil Pennington